

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 8, 2016

Agenda Item: Grassland Conservation Leases

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

Background

FWP proposes to offer 30-year conservation leases to willing, eligible landowners who agree to protect native grassland, sagebrush, and wetlands. In exchange for a one-time payment of \$15/acre, willing landowners will agree not to convert enrolled grasslands and sagebrush to cropland agriculture, drain natural wetlands, or apply herbicides that are detrimental to native plants for the 30-year contract period. Other traditional land uses, such as grazing, will not be prohibited. Landowners will also agree to offer public access for game bird hunting and potentially recreational viewing. Access terms will be negotiated between FWP and the landowner. Funding for leases will come from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (\$180,000), USDA-NRCS Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (\$706,787), Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (\$200,000; no more than \$100,000/project), and Migratory Bird Wetland Program (\$100,000). Current funding will allow FWP to offer leases on approximately 75,000 acres through 2019. Additional funding would expand the opportunity.

The prairies and shrub-steppe habitats of Montana provide critical habitat for many declining grassland birds, including Sprague's pipit and greater sage grouse. The Prairie Pothole Region of Montana supports the highest densities of nesting northern pintail in the nation. However, Montana continues to lose native rangeland habitat and these losses have led to recent ESA listing petitions. FWP proposes to offer this conservation lease payment incentive to willing landowners to help support and maintain ranching operations which will simultaneously protect native wildlife habitat. FWP offered a similar opportunity in 2005-2007 called Sagebrush Leases and landowners enrolled approximately 200,000 acres in 30-year agreements. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered those 200,000 acres as protected from cropland conversion in their recent decision not to list the greater sage grouse as threatened under the ESA. Additional acres will help keep other prairie species off the endangered species list.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Public comment period ran through 5 p.m. Monday, Nov. 14, 2016. FWP received seven comments: four in support, one opposed, and two with no clear preference indicated. The Upland Game Bird Council and Wetland Protection Advisory Council have favorably reviewed a conservation lease proposal.

Alternatives and Analysis

The proposed alternative is to offer 30-year conservation leases to willing, eligible landowners. The alternative is to forego offering a lease opportunity to private landowners and not protecting additional habitat.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission approves offering 30-year conservation leases to private landowners. These leases will support working ranches and protect an additional 75,000 acres of native wildlife habitat.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve offering 30-year conservation leases as presented by FWP.